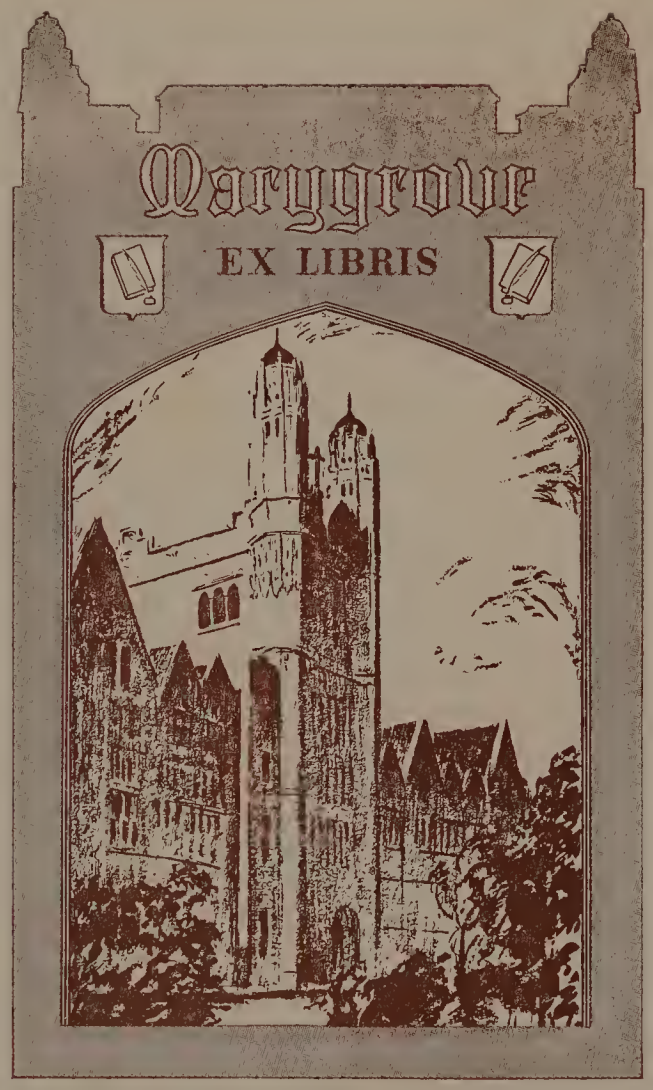
FAMOUS WATER-COLOUR PAINTERS

THOMAS ROWLANDSON

LONDON: THE STUDIO, LIMITED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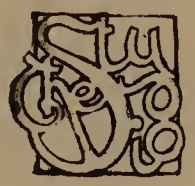
VI—THOMAS ROWLANDSON

INTRODUCTION BY

OSBERT SITWELL



1929

"THE STUDIO" LIMITED

44 LEICESTER SQ., LONDON, W.C.2

Famous Water-Colour Painters

I. FRANK BRANGWYN, R.A.
II. W. RUSSELL FLINT, A.R.A.
III. J. M. W. TURNER, R.A.
IV. RICHARD PARKES BONINGTON
V. PETER DE WINT
VI. THOMAS ROWLANDSON

Others in preparation

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THOMAS ROWLANDSON was happily able to express himself, and define his subjects, with a transcendent swing, ease and shrewdness. This is fortunate for us, since the facts of his career, as is always the case with artists of such prolificacy, must appear somewhat bleak and meagre, and, in many instances, extremely obvious, in comparison with the interest of his multitudinous drawings. It is best, therefore, to state the facts briefly.

Our hero, then, was born in 1757 and died in 1827. As anyone could surmise from the quality of his work, his lifetime coincided with an outburst of national vigour unparalleled since the age of Elizabeth. He saw England lose her empire and build it anew; he saw her in straits so desperate that many of her own people imagined she could never recover, and attain to heights of glory from which it was supposed she could never decline. Thus he could depict, from personal observation, the fruits of defeat and triumph; he could oppose against the ideal summer life of the village, or the scenes of national rejoicing, the squalid horrors of bread riots and bullying terror of the press-gang. Yet, whatever the subject which he chose, every line is instinct with the spirit that made us then a powerful nation. He plainly takes his share in the English scene as the counterpart, in his own realm, of our victories on land and sea. In him we possess not only one of the most bitter and mordant of satirists, but—which is not perhaps so universally recognised—one of the most refined, personal and exquisite of draughtsmen. His name, therefore, should be as much of a boast on our lips as the self-trumpeting names (what magnificent swash-bucklering sounds they make from Drake and Raleigh to Cloudesley Shovel and down to Jellicoe) of naval commanders.

But, alas, for an artist of this particular order, Rowlandson was English, and as a race we are proud of no painters but portrait-painters; for they are of a use that none can deny, since they are able to hand down our toadied likenesses, togged out in our best clothes, to appreciative future generations. Yet it can be argued, I think, that Rowlandson has eternalised the Anglo-Saxon type—not the English one alone—with much more success than Romney or Reynolds or any other such artist. When you see crowds besieging a 'bus or a tram, an English family travelling abroad, a party of people on their way to the theatre in a motor-car, a flower show or a shopping-queue—subjects entirely out of keeping with his age—it is yet of Rowlandson rather than of any contemporary artist that you are reminded. Even as you watch people observing with satisfaction their own portraits in the Academy you feel how much more verisimilitude his renderings of them would have held than have these dolls and dummies that smile back at them. There were other

reasons, too, besides our national love of the portraitist, that tended to dim his fame during the last century; reasons that we propose to enter into at a later stage in this essay, and some of which were, indeed, founded in his very excellence as a master.

To revert to his life, it will not surprise his admirers to be told that our artist was a large, burly man. So much is to be read in every drawing he executed. (And here we may pause for a moment to reflect on something that is so obvious as to be little noted : the extraordinary measure to which the physique of every artist is to be read in his work, exemplifying for our purpose men as diverse as Michaelangelo, Beardsley or Keats, Marcel Proust or Wagner, Pope or Mozart, Rossini or Kipling, Zola or Voltaire). Rowlandson's drawings are plainly the fruit of a remarkable constitution. There is muscle and power of endurance and a very clear eye behind each one of them. His caricatures, as compared with more ordinary ones, are the comments of a gigantic and robust lion—albeit a wise and subtle lion—upon the life of his time, as against those of the ordinary household cat. But never had any cat a more velvet paw. Moreover, in many of his cartoons—as opposed to his drawings—one may perhaps read that curiously detached—or, as some pretend, cruel—surprise at physical suffering, that making-use of its consequent deformity, which arises from little personal acquaintance with it. Perhaps, though not of intention or consciously as much as inherent in every corpuscle of his body, there really was a certain feeling of contempt for the unhealthy.

It will not astonish or dismay his supporters, either, I imagine, to learn that the strength of the artist's constitution enabled him to support great quantities of strong liquor, yet in spite of this failing, to reach the age of seventy, in those days a quite respectable score.

Now comes our only surprise: Rowlandson was by birth half-French : though this, too, might perhaps be deduced from the quality of his line and colouring in his early period. His mother was, in fact, a French lady, from whom he inherited a small private fortune, which he squandered and gambled away. Forced to earn a living, he became an artist.

We may now proceed to examine the artistic ancestry of Rowlandson and, in conjunction, to consider the various styles he stamped out for himself. As befitted one who produced such an infinity of work—in this, as well as in other respects, he resembled Goya—Rowlandson developed several manners, but those predominant were two in number. The chief and most excellent of these was surely his earliest, in which he portrayed the social and country life of his period. In such drawings the French influence is very plainly manifested though never, at the same time, has an artist been so happily, so un-selfconsciously, national. It would be impossible even for a Lap or Eskimo, unacquainted as he might be

with our native land, to mistake their provenance. But the trees, the people, the houses, the horses, are no whit more easily to be placed than the spirit in which, the hand by which, they were rendered. If England were to-morrow to be submerged beneath a tidal wave, so long as a few typical drawings of Rowlandson survived, it would be very simple to reconstruct the life and appearance of her people. They would tell other and foreign generations as much of the character and circumstances of those they celebrate, as do the burial-finds of Ur or Egypt. Indeed, whereas these only reveal to us the apex of the pyramid of national life, Rowlandson's drawings clearly depict the whole broad panorama of English life. Yet it is in a sense the French influence in his work which enables him to achieve this. There is to be found in this early period of his, a Gallic appreciation and use of curly, rococo lines which seems yet to be peculiarly apt as a medium for rendering our landscapes, trees and people. Surely, though this may seem far-fetched, there sounds an occasional echo through these scenes of Fragonard, greatest of all eighteenth-century French masters? But if this French descent is admitted for him, and if we find in Rowlandson the only rococo English pictorial artist, his English ancestry is equally plain. Hogarth, of course, inspires him continually, and through Hogarth we reach Marcellus Laroon, that queer, hybrid father of English painting, and the only other English artist to picture scenes of contemporary life with the same grace and distinction as our protagonist. There is also, to a lesser extent, a certain Flemish flavour in our artist's work, but hardly any Italian influence at all.

But these countless drawings, of such varied and intense beauty, were not counted to him for much fame, either in his own lifetime or in the subsequent century, in comparison with the extremely notorious colour-prints, which constituted his next adventure, and which he had invented as the medium for savage political and personal caricature. And the author of this essay can still remember the surprise with which he discovered for himself the Rowlandson of the first and exquisite period: for his mind had been impressed at an early age by a lengthy—or it seemed so—visit to a country house, in which there were pasted on screens, beneath heavy coats of dark and shining varnish, great numbers of these grotesque, and often brutal, cartoons. In this house the life which Rowlandson had portrayed with so much force still persisted on all sides, and so, though one was compelled to admit the vivid truthfulness of the artist's account of it, of the riding, the drinking and the intense cold, of the political views and daily conversation, one was unprepared for the wit, elegance and delicacy of his perceptions as illustrated by his youthful work. As for the subjects of these early drawings, they were diverse.

Village steeples cleave the cumulus green clouds of the tree tops, under shade of which the villagers dance so gaily. There are pleasant lawns, and parks in which the dappled deer graze, and urban scenes, in which the beau monde saunters or masquerades (these always rendered with a supreme appreciation of the exaggerated follies of fashions in dress), there are carnivals and rustic sports, drawings of young noblemen lurching unsteadily down back alleys among the vegetable stalls of the early morning, groups of sailors and soldiers returning from or setting-out for war, the neat brick streets of provincial towns with a little shopping in progress, the rumbling of gilded coaches as their four horses, with postillions, drag them along the country lanes, their green walls spattered with open wild roses, the havoc wrought by sea-side gales on the east coast, or, favourite subjects, ships in full sail or musicians playing. Many of these drawings have implicit in them a subdued note of satire : but the satire is not allowed to become dominant as it was to become subsequently. To this order belongs the "Boodle's Club Fête at Ranelagh " illustrated in this portfolio. Of the more purely satiric drawings of this time, one of the finest is the famous staircase in Professor Tonk's collection : a work in which the whole ridiculous scene, the admirable curve of the staircase itself as much as the action of the struggling, falling figures seems welded in one continuous, beautiful, and all-expressive line. Never before, I think, and very seldom since, except in Daumier and Toulouse-Lautrec, and in the very finest examples of the work of Forain and Max Beerbohm, will there be found such a subordination of satirical detail to the main theme : yet the result is extremely rich. This same quality is to be seen in " The Tight-Rope Dancer," illustrated in this portfolio, though here the satire is mingled with a tenderness of line and colour and there is more of the grotesquely beautiful and less of the overwhelming. Look at the violinist's lewd, grinning mask as he gazes up at the plump grace of the lady who airily walks her tight-rope above him ! Could ever the swaying, easy, but hesitating motion of such an amphibious expert, the halting and shivering swing of her clothes and feathers, have been better rendered, could even Seurat, supreme master of this type of picture, have brought to it a more complete artistry ? And how truly marvellous is the composition of this drawing, which has the daring but unostentatious simplicity that characterises the work of every innovator.

We now approach the caricatures, more purely satiric, on which we have found that his fame for so long rested. He was in his day immensely well-known, the equivalent of a one-man " Punch "— only a funny " Punch," if such a thing can be imagined. Every week one of his cartoons, or, occasionally a substitute by his excellent disciples, and almost imitators in this vein, Bunbury and

Gilray, were delivered at country houses all over England, and at the clubs, now coming into fashion in London, in Bath and other such resorts of the world. Moreover, they were, one conjectures, to be met with, like copies of "Punch," lying on the table in the excruciating dentist's parlour of the period (lying, just as they had been thrown down at the moment of the awful summons) and most certainly they were to be looked at in all the barbers' shops.

How, if one were familiar with art, but ignorant of this particular contribution to it, could one convey its quality by analogy? Most surely, I think, by a comparison with Japanese woodcuts of more or less the same period. The resemblance is most marked, and entirely unconscious, for probably Rowlandson had never even seen a single object that came from that remote and then self-isolated land. But the Englishman and these Japanese artists both invented a technique absolutely appropriate to the mechanism on which they were relying for multiplication of their work: and this may perhaps account for the likeness. Both, moreover, had invented a convention of the strictest type.

However much the purple, bloated and distorted countenances of Rowlandson's cartoons may offend the over-fastidious, the offence is no æsthetic one. The line and execution is unimpeachable. Further, the nervousness with which these caricatures are approached by those who hate them, is as though the superficial hideousness, which disguises the beauty of their design, was unintentional, instead of being that in which resides their whole point. He was, it should be remembered, in no sense striving to be a . . . . .* Flattery, soothing-syrup and varnish were not in his line. But, alas, it cannot be pretended that these coloured prints are unrealistic, however conventionalised they may be. Just as in other drawings he seized on the most typical and beautiful traits of English life, so here he captured and set down the worst. The technique which in each case he evolved for his purpose was the one most calculated to preserve the life of his subject; never for a moment did his intensely personal style get in his own way, as it occasionally does with other artists. Every drawing from his hand, of whatever description, is as alive as it can be, and so, to this day, his caricatures ring painfully true to the race he depicted, and to its component tribes. The faces he shows us often appear at first sight as the faces of a delirium; and then, horror on horror, one discovers that they are to be encountered every day in street and newspaper. That curious tendency to acromegaly, to an enlargement of the features, which distinguishes the famous political figures of the Anglo-Saxon world, he was the first to notice and use. The affliction must be a racial one, for it is as noticeable in America as in England. First, I think, to be observed in portraits of

* Censored by the Editor.

Cromwell, it is no less obvious in paintings of Washington : while photographs of Presidents Hoover and Wilson, Mr. Baldwin and almost all our other prominent, and especially, more pugnacious, politicians show them to share this same peculiarity. In " Dr. Syntax," most famous of all the heroes of his book illustrations * we find the best known and, at the same time, least exaggerated summing up of this unfortunate anomaly.

With this, we grasp one of the two main reasons of that contempt and unpopularity in which the name of this remarkable artist was held during the greater part of the nineteenth century. He was indifferent it was said, to the physical suffering of others. " He made fun of people's faces and their bodies." Herein we reach the root of it. The English nineteenth century had no use for the satirist and never produced one (the nearest approach was the music-hall artist of the time). Indeed, it confounded the satirist with the moralist, held that all satire should be aimed at making people " better," in the restricted sense in which this word was then used (i.e. either " more docile," if in lowly circumstances, or still richer and more church-going if already well-off). The complacency of the Victorian age resented any unbiassed critical comment, and in consequence the art of satirical drawing, in which England had once excelled, sank from Cruikshank to du Maurier (who patted indulgently while pretending to rap, his age) down to the hollow, photographic unrealities and mediocrities of a . . . .† Now if Rowlandson had contented himself with ridiculing his own epoch, the nineteenth century would have approved, for it was particularly conscious, as is every generation, of being the progressive, improvement-making heir of destiny. But, while summing up his age to perfection, Rowlandson also unfortunately achieved the universal, and summed up permanently his nation. These red and bloated faces, though " grossly exaggerated," though surrounded and disguised by the funny, artificial old white-wigs of a dead fashion, though, indeed, the whisker had crept over and receded from them since those days, were only too easily to be identified. In making fun of their fathers, he had made fun of them themselves. This was unforgivable. " Coarse and offensive " was the verdict.

The truth is that this artist's attitude toward physical suffering and deformity was representative of that of his epoch. It is true that he does not seem to show as much pity as Hogarth : but then Hogarth, for all his longing to wipe foreigners off the face of the earth, was essentially moralist and humanitarian.

* To the two predominant styles of which we have attempted here a definition must be added a third, which requires an essay to itself. We refer to that art of book illustration which Rowlandson perfected toward the end of his life. Of the volumes which he decorated, perhaps the best known are " Dr. Syntax " and the " Dance of Life." All are subsequent to the year 1810, and were commissioned by, and executed for, Ackerman, the publisher.

† Censored by the Editor.

Rowlandson was most assuredly not morbid, but his recording of cripples and lunatics is the proof of that pity which was later denied. The artist, however, unless by temperament a biassed, rather than critical, commentator, has to be content with arrangements of line and colour, of whatever they are constituted. It is no business of his. He must record the scene and respect the truth. (And would it have been true to have depicted a humanitarian eighteenth century?) Tortures and picnics, live people or dead, fruit, flowers or dead game, are all grist to his mill. Even Goya, that supreme master of the grotesque, accepts what the age gives him, never allows his personal view of life to obtrude, except in some outburst of temper so violent that he could not control it. But Rowlandson's temperament was, being English and not Spanish, still more moderate.

Now we will consider the other cause, or rather excuse, for the attitude which was adopted toward him for so many years. As we examine his earlier works, not those ones in which he was wilfully caricaturing, we notice how many intoxicated persons, either singly or in whole groups, frequent his drawings. This from the æsthetic point of view, may seem unimportant: yet it contributed largely to his being for so long deposed from his proper position—that of the greatest master of pure line that England has had the good fortune to produce—for in his depicting of drunkards there is, again, no hint of moral disapprobation, unless one can detect, now and then, an altogether personal, "morning-after" revulsion. What else, the Victorian age asked itself, could you expect from such a libellous and grotesque caricaturist? His finer drawings were obviously, in this sense, immoral, and therefore bad. And he was dismissed, as a mere colour-print artist: to be compared with one of our portrait-painters, as "Little Tich" with Henry Irving. Every generation claims to drink less than that of its grandfathers. The sodden, port-drinking middle-classes of the nineteenth century looked back with horror at the rum-punch orgies of the eighteenth. The cocktail-drinking twentieth century is pained at the dull, heavy drinking of the nineteenth. Probably, relative to any increase or decrease in population, the number of those who tend to alcoholic excess in each class varies very little from one age to another. There are, speaking generally, two types especially addicted to drink; one, weak mentally and physically, feels at once a constant need of stimulation and of an escape from reality; the other drinks out of friendliness and high spirits, founded on good health that no amount of immoderate drinking can shatter. It is to this type that Rowlandson belonged, and which so often figures in his work.

Consider the drawings in which his drunkards occur—sailors roaring victory down little narrow red-brick streets, clumps of heads watching them, with pride and joy from the window; the armistice-night-

like scenes of dancing, but in the broad noonday and under the shade of rugged elms, their leaves shivering with the pale English light; soldiers and sailors dancing with the girls of the town, while even the fiddler who plays for them is drunk too; the drunkenness of the gentry, with their insolent and clouded eyes; the scenes at parties, people falling and staggering. Yet in nearly all these variations on intoxicated themes, one can say that the artist treats the drunkard with as much sympathy and understanding as the satirist imprisoned in his hand would ever allow to any human frailty. His attitude, in this respect, was always one of observation, and, usually, even of pleasure in the ridiculous and unexpected fantasies that resulted—without a hint, as we have said, of condemnation. Yet, there are, of course, exceptions—with an artist who achieved such a volume of work, numberless exceptions. There are, for example, drawings of Doctors of Divinity, with very red, cruel, hypocritical, drunken faces—such faces as that which one bestows instinctively upon Judge Jeffreys—but, even in these, it is the hypocrisy, we feel, rather than the drink which incurs his censure.

In the main, then, his outlook was as the nineteenth century considered it. Compare this robust artist's robust drunkards with those of Cruikshank, his most obvious descendant in England, of Beardsley, or of the nineteenth-century French draughtsmen. There is nothing ominous, much that is ludicrous in them. These figures are drinking, not to escape from life, but to enter more fully into it. Degas's absinthe-drinkers, the café-drunkards of Beardsley, of Forain, are a sinister enough crew, with murder and the madhouse always round the crooked and menacing corner. Cruikshank, who began life as a drunkard and ended as a very fervent and convinced abstainer, introduces into all his scenes of inebriation a tract-like note, which makes one disgusted with the sinner, sorry for his wife and children. They are pitiable, destined to end in the workhouse, via the gin-shop, the lights of which show so many auras of lime-yellow and crocus-mauve light, sparkling like the poor man's diamonds through the fog-bound Saturday night of an industrial England. Hogarth's drunken noblemen will finish up badly, too, one feels sure. Debt, every detail of the painting shows us, started them off, for they *would* despise honest English ways of living, and adopt a frenchified mode (enough in that artist's opinion to damn anybody, including the French) : their clothes were foreign in style, they frequented the Italian opera, their houses were full of kickshaws and bric-a-brac, and now, as you see, they end in Newgate, serving drinks behind the bar. So much Hogarth tells us. These rakes, too, are pitiable. But not so with Rowlandson's drunkards, who, on the whole, appear a jolly and capable, if abandoned, lot. They are, indeed, nearer akin to the intoxicated

boors of Teniers and Breughel, except that they are not dull-eyed or witless. They belong to a permanent *plein-air* school of drunkards. They may, one knows, from looking at the scene, have temporarily to pledge their belongings. Indeed, over the fluttering leaves of the English trees, we can see the three gilded pills of the Medici hanging exotically on the June air, while above them, out of an upper window of the hunched-up and rat-ridden old house from which they depend, can be detected a sly nose and the peering of crafty Eastern eyes, which perhaps, from that height, can discern already the promised land, the Chinese-Gothic palaces, gold-plate and flower-filled salons of Park Lane. But that day of power is still far distant, and these singing figures below will assuredly get their few valuables out of pawn again. Nor, one is aware, will this somewhat rollicking regime in which they are indulging injure them in heart, head, limb or reputation. Boys will be boys, the drawing informs us : a little gout for the gentry in their old age, a slight struggle, perhaps, for the others, with the night-watchman. These are all the penalties that will be exacted from them. The reason for this difference of outlook between artists as near each other as Rowlandson and Cruikshank is to be found as much in the outside world as in their own minds. Within the few decades that divided them, industrialism had conquered the world. In Rowlandson's epoch, drink was unadulterated, air was pure, and poverty of another, and less crowded, order.

As we turn over the last of this great artist's drawings, it is interesting to speculate on his influence, the influence of his varied manners. In the sphere of English drawing, it died away, in the direct line, with Cruikshank, but has revived more widely in our own time. It is not without significance that one of the most interesting of recent musical works, by a young English composer, Mr. W. T. Walton, should have been named "Portsmouth Point" after a drawing by Rowlandson : and there are many other signs of homage. Mr. Wyndham Lewis and his Vorticist group of painters showed, I think, distinct traces of it. Abroad, on the other hand, his influence never dwindled. It cannot be doubted that Goya, his great contemporary, was aware toward the end of his long and formidable career, of Rowlandson's colour-prints, though he was probably ignorant of his finer, more elegant work. It is pleasant to think that the old Spanish artist who had in his time, too, dealt in idyllic scenes, and had then moved likewise more and more toward the grotesque, may have worked with one of these prints nailed up on the wall of his studio, peering at it and wondering about its author. Moreover, Rowlandson survived, incorporated in a living and more magnificent tradition, through the work of Daumier, and those whom he, in his turn, influenced. It is clear that Daumier not only resembles, but often echoes, our earlier artist.

Indeed his drawing of the " Three Doctors " is an adaptation of the ones to which we have referred. Gavarni, too, who was much in England and Scotland, must have known his work, and in the " Galop Final " has perfected that running, all-embracing line which we have noted in the " Staircase." Finally, we cannot doubt that Constantin Guys, most exquisite of latter-day draughtsmen admired the Englishman's work, for in his sketches of papal equipages and the like, one can once again hear and see Rowlandson's gilded coaches tumbling and trundling through the heavy and undying green tunnels of the English lanes and royal roads.

OSBERT SITWELL.

THE EDITOR DESIRES TO THANK CAPTAIN DESMOND COKE, CHARLES RICKETTS, ESQ., OSBERT SITWELL, ESQ., AND THE AUTHORITIES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM WHO HAVE KINDLY ALLOWED THE WATER-COLOURS TO BE HERE REPRODUCED.

PLATE I.

BOODLES' CLUB FETE AT RANELAGH

In the collection of Captain Desmond Coke.

PLATE II.

LANDING AT GREENWICH

In the collection of Captain Desmond Coke.

PLATE III.

THE TIGHT-ROPE DANCER

In the collection of Osbert Sitwell, Esq.

PLATE IV.

HARVESTING

In the collection of Captain Desmond Coke.

PLATE V.

"MUSIC HATH CHARM TO SOOTHE THE SAVAGE BREAST"

In the collection of Charles Ricketts, Esq.

PLATE VI.

THE SWING

In the collection of Charles Ricketts, Esq.

PLATE VII.

EEL-PIE ISLAND

In the collection of Captain Desmond Coke.

PASSAC
BOAT
HOUSE

PLATE VIII.

CHRISTIE'S AUCTION ROOMS

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